

Spring is going to come early in our country, One inch of insurance fell last night. Light hailstones mixed in heavy rain drops assured the coming of the glad season. Plenty of feed wagons will be halted in the next 10 days. All we have to do is wait for warm weather.

Sheep were wintering fat in the Shortgrass Country without the rains. The ones left that weren't on bitterweed looked like fall flushed shearlings. By June, I think even we bitterweed operators will be over the big die-off. Say what you wish about cattlemen, I foresee some mighty soggy rolls on the sheep people by fall.

So the reports say, sheep numbers are up for the first time in two or three decades. Sheep owners, I suspect, are on the decline. No one to my knowledge bothers much to count the herders. Such outfits as a Agriculture Statistics Service or perhaps the Dept. of Agriculture has a vague idea we exist, but as far as there being a concrete population figure like other games, I doubt that anyone knows.

At the last Sheep and Goat Raiser's convention the ranks seemed thinner. It's hard to estimate the size of a crowd of herders. City life excites them so much they'll hover in tight groups at the slightest noise or bright lights. Door counts are impossible. Sure as you get a little bunch started, the herd will stampede for a hospitality room or a refreshment center, and more will go behind you than can be tabulated.

Banks and loan companies have the most accurate idea of the number of sheepmen operating today, Jugs and money brokers keep close watch on anyone connected with livestock. When old lady O'Leary's milk cow kicked over the lantern at the start of the Chicago fire, it was a downtown bank that set the fire alarm.

Straight cow herders used to claim that they located us by the sheep smell. However after lambs began to bring 80 cents a pound, a lot of the odor went out of the business. I know I used to have a terrible prejudice against hair goats in my younger days, Now every time I read of kid hair bringing what used to be the tops on the Brussels gem market, that intolerance melts into the agreement brand of envy.

The problem is that sheepmen are hard to find. After so much of the superior sheep ranges were dedicated to coyotes and eagles, the woolie operator became a shy, withdrawn person. More of a nocturnal type loner who was frightened of strangers and distrustful of nearly anyone.

It made a definite personality change in the whole industry when the coyote became more important than the ranchers. I know one time at the house a little Girl Scout came by selling cookies. Bless her heart, when I told her my wife would pay her, she put her little hand on my arm, and said, "I know how hard it is with the coyotes, Mr. Noelke".

I was so stricken that I gave her a dime tip. Here was a sibling in pigtails that already knew more than the whole Congress of the United States and no telling how much more she was going to learn.

The hardheads that are left raising sheep out west say that the packs are so thick that quail hunters shoot coyotes in broad daylight. I suppose all that good country is going to be used for a laboratory for a flea powder company, or turned into an experiment station for rabies. The folks who brought this on us must have a terrible fondness for watching coyotes. I never did want to watch anything when I thought I was going to be hungry. Being born during that other depression must have caused that idea.

In a few short weeks, the yellow and blue flowers will be covering the right-of-ways. Outside my window, small shoots of grass are coming up under the cedar brush, Rebirth is on the way. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for her to come.